Artist Statement - 2025

MEMENTOS

This series is comprised of pairs of paintings. Each pair consists of one landscape and one interior. The various landscapes are from the Pacific Northwest. They include steep peaks and glacially carved valleys of the North Cascades, wildflowers and the volcano Tahoma, mushrooms and Pacific rhododendron growing out of stumps in the woods between Wy'east and Portland and a large nurse log in the lush forest nearby. Each landscape is based on a recent experience outdoors: hikes, bike rides with friends, and rambles to find mushrooms. The first paintings for this show began with a road trip that Sara, my wife, took me on through North Cascades National Park; sharing with me, a trip she used to take to see her grandparents in Eastern Washington. As I work in my studio, painting these landscapes, the recalled experience is embedded with my sentiments and various artistic influences. Visual observation shares the canvas with emotion and symbolism.

Following each landscape painting, I painted an interior scene that is imagined and curated to reflect the specific landscape. The interior pieces are in essence, still lifes, however they zoom out to also contain a well-lit and furnished room, in a format synonymous to interior design magazines. Aiming for a symbiosis between the pairs, the plants and rocks in each arrangement correlate specifically to the other painting. Heirloom objects including sources of fire, glazed ceramics and oxidized turquoise parallel the forces that created and continue to change these landscapes. Through the furnishings, these interiors show natural materials cut from landscapes; patterns of wood grain and stone polished into objects that become pedestals for their unrefined versions, i.e. plants and small stones, encompassing a duality in where I find beauty; human design and nature.

Recurring subjects in all these still life paintings are Viewing Stones and Ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging. As examined in my last show, these have origins in a deep history of appreciation for nature in Chinese and Japanese landscape painting and gardens. Chinese gardens, which later influenced Japan, originally developed because the spiritual importance for humans to connect to nature was recognized. The gardens act as microcosms of landscape providing a way to commune with nature even while living an urban life. Through tangential artistic inspirations, I keep finding a connection with this idea of a garden. I believe this is because it speaks to my own reverence for nature and concern with how we, might again, find connection to the natural world. My introduction to Ikebana came through my grandmother. My father was born in Japan when his military parents were stationed there, and while he was too young to have memories of the place, my grandmother always made flower arrangements influenced by their time in Japan. Having inherited flower arranging supplies and books from her, I sometimes start the day working in my studio by arranging flowers from our garden. This ritual, cross-cultural and passed down, has tremendously influenced my approach to painting plants. Bringing out sculptural qualities of plants has allowed me to find new avenues in the long tradition of landscape painting.

When studying painting in college, I believe I first found personal direction to my art when I embraced my love of mountains. I painted mountains from photos taken during camping and ski trips, and I started finding similarities between these grand landscapes and small rocks I collected. Painting rocks from life and mountains from my photos showed me similarities between micro and macro views, which predisposed me to appreciate the tradition of Viewing Stones. When visiting a friend in Korea, I purchased a weathered rock on a carved wooden base. I found out that this was a Suseok, a Korean viewing stone. There are similar traditions of appreciating these stones in Japan, called Suiseki and in China called Gongshi. Suiseki is closely tied with Bonsai, and often represent a natural scene in miniature. Gongshi's weathered shapes bear witness to the expansiveness of time through effects of erosion. Just as the North Cascades came from the turmoil of collisions, eruptions and glacial erosion these stones show nature's state of flux in opposition to the sign of permanence often given to rocks. Viewing stones can also act as a souvenir from a trip to a grand landscape. I had this idea in mind when I started the first painting for this show after visiting the North Cascades National Park. I wanted to capture these grand peaks on modestly small canvases, as miniature keepsakes of my experience.

A lot of my love for mountains and rocks came from skiing with my aunt, a geologist who took my brother and I skiing throughout our childhood. She would point out geological features during the long drive back from skiing. Some of my personal collection of rocks also comes from my mom's parents, whose basement contained an elaborate lapidary setup to cut and polish stones. A lot of the sensibilities that guide my paintings of interiors come from memories of my grandparent's houses on both sides of my family. I have vivid recollections of exploring these houses layered with midcentury décor, shelves of tchotchkes, dried flowers and rocks.

In tracing aesthetic influences, I started to consider the personal histories of the objects in my still lifes. My painting "Still Life on Wood Table" is full of family keepsakes displayed on the coffee table in my home. Many of these mementos come from specific family members. Among these objects there is also a glass mushroom shaped lamp that references the painting "Still Life on a Glass Table" by David Hockney. Painted following the end of a romance, Hockney's intimate observation of objects is charged with heartbreak. The same lamp also relates to the mushrooms growing out of the nurse log in my painting "After Life". Fungus is what breaks down wood so that dead trees don't just lie there for eternity; but instead can be recycled into new life. In the forest I find solace; decaying remains of old giants yield new life. Saplings, moss, lichen and fungus are displayed in abundance like flowers on the grave of a beloved. Ikebana flower arranging has roots in Buddhist offerings that were accompanied by candles and incense. The brevity of smoke and fleeting beauty of flowers also recurs as tropes in the still lifes of Dutch Vanitas symbolizing the transience of life and the certainty of death. In the slow observation required to bring objects to life on a canvas, what is this act if not the attempt to hold on to the ephemeral.

-Chris Russell